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ABSTRACT

This multivariate, longitudinal study examined the role of mothers' employment with respect to children's cognitive and social development, children's home environment, and mothers' attitudes toward employment. A total of 130 middle class children and their mothers participated. Data on children's cognitive and social development, the home environment, maternal employment status, and family structure variables were collected from the children's first to fifth year of age. When their children were 1 year old, 36 percent of the mothers worked; when children were 5 years old, 56 percent were employed. At the child's fifth year, mothers were questioned regarding their work patterns, attitudes toward work, and perceptions of the influence of their employment on their children's development. Multiple regressions indicated that maternal employment status did not significantly predict children's development or home environment, whereas family structure variables were significant predictors. Mothers' attitudes were favorable, with the majority reporting a positive influence of employment on their child's development and family relationships. These data, in conjunction with previous longitudinal findings on home environment, indicate that the experiences to which children are exposed are important for development, regardless of maternal employment status. Results thus support a favorable view of maternal employment. Public policy implications are suggested. (Author/RH)

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Maternal Employment and Young Children's Development: A Longitudinal Investigation

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A Longitudinal Investigation

Abstract

This multivariate, longitudinal study examined the role of mothers' employment in children's cognitive and social development, their home environment, and mothers' attitudes towards employment. 130 middle-class children were evaluated from 1 to 5 years. Data on their cognitive and social development, home environment, maternal employment status, and family structure variables were collected continuously. At 5-years,mothers' attitudes were assessed. Multiple regressions indicated that maternal employment status did not significantly predict children's development or home environment, while family structure variables were significant predictors. Mothers' attitudes were favorable, with the majority of mothers reporting a positive influence of employment on their child's development and family relationships. These data, in conjunction with our previous longitudinal findings on home environment, indicate that the experiences to which children are exposed are important for development regardless of maternal employment status. A favorable view of maternal employment is supported, and public policy implications are advanced.

Maternal Employment and Young Children's Development:

A Longitudinal Investigation

Over 50% of mothers with children under age 6 are employed. With this large proportion of women working, questions regarding the relationship of mother's employment to children's development become increasingly significant, particularly for children in infancy and the preschool years. The role of maternal employment in early development continues to be an unresolved issue with reported effects ranging from positive (e.g., for gender development) to negative (e.g., for separation anxiety). Prior research has tended to be restricted to examining the role of mothers' employment on single variables at one particular age. The present research takes a longitudinal, multivariate approach to studying the role of mothers' employment in children's cognitive and social development, and their home environment, allowing for the examination of concurrent and prospective relationships between maternal employment and multiple aspects of children's development. Maternal employment was examined in the context of family structural variables to determine its relative contribution.

An ongoing longitudinal study is in progress in which an original sample of 130 children from middle-class families have participated from 12-mo. of age to the present (60-mo). Subjects are predominantly white, were full-term, and free of neurological or other problems. At 12-mo., 36% of the mothers worked, with a linear increase to 56% at 5 years. Sample attrition was minimal throughout the course of the investigation with 86% returning at age 5. Children were comprehensively evaluated on cognitive and social measures from 12- to 60-mo., and the quality of their home environment was assessed. At each assessment, data on the employment status of mothers were collected. Additionally, at age 5, a questionnaire was completed by the mothers regarding

their work patterns (e.g., job flexibility), attitudes towards work (e.g., personal satisfaction), and perceptions of the influence of their employment on their children's development.

The cognitive measures included: Bayley Mental Development Index (12-, 18-, and 24-mo.); McCarthy Scales of Children's Development (30-, 36-, and 42-mo.), and the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (60-mo). The social measures included: Preschool Interpersonal Problem Solving Scale (42-mo.); Social Competence Scales of the Child Behavior Checklist (48-mo) completed by the mother; and the Kohn social competence scale (60-mo.) completed by the child's teacher. Children's home environments were directly observed using the HOME Inventory (15- and 39-mo). Data on parental social class were obtained at each assessment using the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index; data on children's birth order and gender, and mothers' marital status, were also collected.

Hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted. Predictors were: maternal employment status, SES, marital status, birth order, child's gender, and the interaction between maternal employment and gender (in that order). Criterion variables were the cognitive and social development measures, and home environment (HOME) scores. Analyses were conducted concurrently (e.g., employment status at 12-mo. with the 12-mo. child development measures), and prospectively (e.g., employment status at 12-mo. with child development measures at each prospective age), to determine immediate and cumulative relationships between employment status and children's development.

Results showed that for both concurrent and prospective analyses, maternal employment status was not a significant predictor of any child development or home environment measure, indicating that whether or not a mother works does not relate to children's development or their home environment. Significant predictors included family SES, and birth order.

Significant multiple R's ranged from .32 to .51.

Regarding maternal attitudes towards employment, the large majority of employed mothers reported that: (a) their employment had a favorable influence on their children's development as well as on the mother-child relationship; (b) their children were not upset when their mothers go to work; (c)they found little difficulty coordinating work and family responsibilities; (d) their employment did not make them feel stressed in their relationships with their children; (e)they were working for both personal satisfaction and family income; (f)their husbands were favorable towards their employment; and (g) their employment increased their husbands' involvement with the child.

Correlational data revealed a pattern of significance in which mothers' and fathers' job flexibility, and mothers' personal satisfaction with work were positively related to their favorable perceptions of the influence of mother's employment on children's development. Further, working for personal satisfaction was positively and significantly related to the perception that the child is not upset when mother goes work, satisfaction with current employment, ability to coordinate job and family responsibilities, job flexibility, and father's involvement with the child. Greater personal satisfaction was negatively related to stress in dealing with the child. Working for family income was negatively and significantly related to personal satisfaction with employment and ability to coordinate family and job responsibilities, and positively related to stress in dealing with the child and prevention of spending as much time as possible with the child. While number of hours worked was positively related to working for income, it was not related to maternal attitudes. Magnitudes of significant correlations ranged from .22 to .55. Maternal attitudes and number of hours worked were unrelated to children's actual cognitive development at 5 years.

On the whole, a favorable picture emerged from our data regarding the role of maternal employment in children's development. Maternal employment status had no negative relation to children's development over a 5-year period. Further, mothers' attitudes tended to be positive, with mothers reporting higher personal satisfaction and job flexibility having more favorable attitudes regardless of number of hours worked. These data, in conjunction with our previous longitudinal findings on home environment, indicate that it is the experiences to which children are exposed that are important for their development regardless of maternal employment status. Public policy needs to move in the direction of more flexible work arrangements for mothers, towards enhancing the quality of the environment provided for children, towards enhancing the personal satisfaction of careers for women, and towards promoting the view that maternal employment has no negative influence on children's development.

Table 1

Maternal Employment Attitudes: Means and Standard Deviations

Attitude	M	SD
How has your employment influenced your child's development in the following areas? (1 is negative and 5 is positive influence)		
Intellectual	3.8	.82
Social	3.9	.96
Emotional	3.6	1.10
Mother-child relationship	3.8	.95
What is your child's reaction when you go to work? (scored from very upset 1 to not at all upset 5)	4.8	.52
How flexible is your work schedule? (1 is minimal and 5 is very flexible)	2.9	1.50
If married, how flexible is your husband's work schedule? (1 is minimal and 5 is very flexible)	2.4	1.3
A major reason for my employment is family income (1 is strongly disagree, 5 is strongly agree)	3.7	1.50
A major reason for my employment is personal satisfaction	3.7	1.30
(1 is strongly disagree, 5 is strongly agree)	3.7	1.30
How happy are you with your current employment? (1 is very unhappy, 5 is very happy)	4.1	1.1
I find it easy to coordinate my work and family responsibilies. (1 is strongly disagree, 5 is strongly agree)	3.9	.96
My employment makes me feel stressed when dealing with my child. (1 is strongly disagree, 5 is strongly agree)	2.1	1.07

Table 1--Continued

Attitude	M	SD
My employment has prevented me from spending as much time with my child as I would like to. (1 is strongly disagree, 5 is strongly agree).....	2.9	1.30
If married, how favorable is your husband of your employment? (1 is not favorable, 5 is very favorable).....	4.5	.90
If married, how do you believe your employment has influenced your husband's involvement with your child? (1 is little involvement, 5 is much involvement).....	4.0	1.10
Hours per week working.....	31.66	11.55

Note. N's ranged from 53 to 61.

Table 2

Correlations among Employment Attitudes and Children's Cognitive Development

Attitude	Personal Satisfaction	Family Income	KABC MPS[a]	KABC ACH[b]
Mother's flexibility	.25*	-.43***	-.08	
Father's flexibility	.14	-.03	-.09	-.15
Happy with employment	.44***	-.20	.14	.11
Coordinate work and family	.40***	-.22*	.10	.15
Stress with child	-.42***	.32**	-.07	-.12
Prevented from spending time with child	-.55***	.45***	.02	-.11
Husband favorable of employment	.21	-.06	.01	.10
Father's involvement with child	.43***	-.02	.14	.14
Influence on intellectual development	.40***	-.22*	.14	.08
Influence on social development	.02	-.01	.06	.09
Influence on emotional development	.24*	.01	.07	.00
Influence on mother-child relationship	.33***	-.04	-.03	-.04
Child's reaction	.37**	.03	.16	.10
Personal satisfaction	1.00	-.30**	.02	.21*
Family income	-.30**	1.00	-.08	-.20
Hours per week working	-.05	.53***	-.11	-.21

Note. N's ranged from 53 to 61.

[a]Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children Mental Processing Scale

[b]Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children Achievement Scale

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$